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Teaching Vocational Work Ethics Using Direct, Indirect and Self-Evaluative Methods

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Abstract

The term, vocational work ethics, defines values and attitudes that guide behavior in the workplace. To prepare entry-level workers for work, the staff of a vocational high school in upstate New York developed 34 outcomes and rubrics to help teachers teach vocational work ethics. This ethnographic study of a health occupation program shows that students learned vocational work ethics when direct, indirect and self-evaluative teaching methods were used.

An ethnographic study of a health occupation program assessed students' achievements in the performance outcomes that define vocational work ethics at the Tompkins-Seneca-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services (TST BOCES) in Ithaca, New York. Fifteen weeks of research focused on the following questions:

1. Which teaching methods most effectively introduce health occupation students to vocational work ethics behavior?
2. To what extent do health occupation students know the behaviors that employers expect from entry-level employees?
3. To what extent are health occupation students' self-evaluations congruent with their work behaviors?
4. As students adopt new workplace behaviors, do health occupation students follow developmental stages similar to those reported by Miller and Coady, (1986)?
5. Which teaching methods most effectively enable health occupation students to change undesirable

workplace behaviors to desirable ones?

Key Concepts

The term, vocational work ethics, defines values and attitudes that guide behavior in the workplace. A review of the literature found that work behaviors of most entry-level employees do not meet employers' needs (Talarzyk, 1975, as cited by Maywood, 1982; Congressional Committee on Small Business, 1990 ; Magaziner, as cited by Jesser, 1991). The literature suggests that a formal, work ethics curriculum be taught in the vocational classroom (Douthitt, 1990; McCracken, 1990). The idea of a work ethics curriculum is consistent with the competencies that are listed in the SCANS report from the United States Department of Labor (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991). SCANS states that individuals must have basic and interpersonal skills to be employed successfully.

Literature about teaching vocational work ethics categorizes work attitudes into three developmental stages (Miller and Coady, 1986). Stage One behavior is influenced by positive or negative reinforcement. At Stage Two, students are able to apply previously learned rules to routine situations. Stage Three students understand the underlying principles formulating rules and can adapt previously learned rules to develop new and creative responses to problem solving.

The results of two studies in the literature provided the focus of the study presented here. The first is an ethnographic study of a secondary school vocational program in food preparation (Claus, 1984). The research, completed at a school with characteristics similar to TST BOCES, reports that students enjoy vocational classes over regular high school classes because behavioral standards are less strict at the vocational school. The results also show vocational students avoiding responsibilities and opportunities to learn by enlisting teachers and classmates to do their work for them.

The second study is a survey of vocational teachers in Georgia (Ford & Herren, 1993). The study reports vocational teachers only using inconsistent and indirect teaching methods to teach vocational work ethics (i.e., model and teachable moments). The study also reports that vocational teachers did not feel successful at teaching work ethics. The study recommends in-service education for teachers to learn how to introduce vocational work ethics with direct teaching methods.

Background

TST BOCES operates secondary school and adult vocational programs for eight school districts in the Ithaca, New York area. In December 1992, vocational teachers, teacher aides and administrators discussed the SCANS report (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991). To define their role in preparing students for work, the TST BOCES vocational staff identified 34 work ethic skills they expected students to achieve. The 34 skills, named "performance outcomes" were categorized into the following five areas: Adaptable Worker, Skilled Worker, Effective Communicator, Self-Directed Worker, and Responsible Worker. The outcomes were shown to area businesses and industries for their realistic value.

A rating system was established to evaluate students' performances: 1=above entry-level, 2=entry-level, 3=below entry-level, 4=unacceptable. The TST BOCES vocational staff began using the rating system on students' quarterly progress reports, however, the system was ineffective because each teacher used different criteria to measure Performance Outcome behavior. The staff then established rubrics that standardized ratings by describing the expected behavior for each performance level.

To apply the standards of the Performance Outcomes in the Medical Technologies vocational program, three methods are used. (a) Direct methods involve specific lessons that introduce performance outcomes and teach the rubrics by which students will be evaluated. (b) Indirect methods use classroom teachable moments and school or health care professionals as role models. (c) Students evaluate their own work behavior and receive feedback on the evaluations from the teacher.

Design

The research was carried out during the first 15 weeks of the school year. The teacher collected data from daily observations of behavior identified in the performance categories of "Self-Directed Worker" and "Responsible Worker." Observations were noted on paper and transcribed later electronically. Copies of students' self-evaluations and exercises where students wrote their thoughts, feelings, or opinions were also included as data. Graphs of students' grades, attendance, and ratings depicted patterns of behavior.

Setting

TST BOCES is located in the Finger Lakes region of rural, upstate New York where over 500 high school students attend 38 vocational education programs. In addition to high school students, about 25 out-of-school adults are admitted to vocational programs, if class size permits.

A three part grading system is used to evaluate all TST BOCES vocational students. Students' course grades are averaged from grades for theory, technical skills, and daily class participation.

Students must be present and participate in class to earn the participation grade. Medical Technologies students earn daily participation grades by demonstrating entry-level behavior listed in the performance outcomes. Entry-level behavior in each major category earns 20 points for daily grade totals of 100 points.

Students are introduced to health care through the New York State Health Occupation Education Core Curriculum. This curriculum includes medical terminology, anatomy and physiology, human growth and development, job seeking skills, communication skills, data processing skills, and entry-level patient care skills. Students work and learn in the classroom, five days every week, during the first half of the school year. During second semester, students intern at local health care practices or facilities as aides or assistants. This study was conducted in the classroom setting when students are first introduced to health care work.

Subjects

Sixteen students were enrolled in the Medical Technologies class of 1996-97. This total includes 13 secondary students and three adult students. Four high school students withdrew from the program while the study was in progress. Three of the 16 class members were male. Eight high school students were seniors, four were juniors, and one was a freshman. All students were 16 years of age or older. The adults in the program had previously earned high school or General Education Development diplomas. One adult had previously earned a Bachelor of Arts degree.

Findings

Students were asked to write the characteristics of an outstanding employee during the first and 15th weeks of school. The students' first described outstanding employees as "not lazy," "giving 110%," "enjoys their job" or has "a positive attitude." Students then compared their descriptions with the TST BOCES performance outcomes. Writings from 15 weeks later were more detailed and included phrases from the rubrics like, "self-directed worker," "responsible worker," "prioritizes tasks" or "doesn't need to be reminded." In his second writing, one high school junior described an outstanding employee as "someone who can take orders and give them as well."

Differences in grades for daily participation separated students into three distinct groups. Group 1 students consistently demonstrated expected entry-level behavior; Group 2 students frequently demonstrated entry-level behavior; and Group 3 students occasionally demonstrated entry-level behavior.

Direct teaching methods used to teach vocational work ethics introduced students to the concept of workplace culture. How values differ in various settings or groups (i.e. in school, with peers, or in work environments) was discussed. One or two performance outcomes and corresponding rubrics were read at the beginning of every class with activities following that emphasized entry-level behavior for those outcomes. In teaching the performance outcome, "Uses Available Resources" during a first-aid lesson, students were

required to make splints out of common, non-medical household items. Another lesson asked students what a direct order from their supervisor might "sound like". Students were surprised to learn that supervisors use phrases like "would you please" when giving orders.

Other direct methods for teaching vocational work ethics included posting various jobs in the classroom and giving participation credit to those who did the work. Students were reminded to demonstrate they were listening when others spoke and were asked to write explanations for incomplete homework.

Indirect methods, like teachable moments, were used when students were seen handling equipment improperly or performing unsafe acts. Health care professionals who were invited to speak to the class modeled expected entry-level behavior. The guests' work clothes, their prompt arrival times, the pride that they demonstrated in their work, and their loyalty to their employers exemplified vocational work ethics. Students soon began coaching each other in entry-level work performance too.

Reflections

The data showed students struggling to learn classroom and school policies as well as entry-level behaviors in the early weeks of the study. A consistent daily focus on the performance outcomes, rubrics, and the students' self-evaluations helped many students link procedure with responsible employee behavior. Self-directed behavior was seen less often and was sometimes difficult to separate from responsible behavior. When students had to be reminded of work, they were no longer considered self-directed.

Class seating provided insight about the students' values. At first, students sat with others who were from their own high schools. There was little conversing among students from different school districts, even during activities to become acquainted. Within the first two weeks, students arranged themselves into groups that were similar in composition to the Groups 1, 2, and 3 and provided minimal interaction among groups. Daily participation grades increased and the class began functioning as a team during the eleventh week when assigned seating was established.

Conclusions

Since the Vocational Department at TST BOCES began meeting four years ago to learn how to teach vocational work ethics, the following events have occurred. All meetings were open, but optional to all department members. Average attendance at the meetings represented 75% of teachers, 35% of teacher aides, and 100% of administrators. The vocational staff facilitated most meetings, occasionally contracting with outside facilitators as well. Meeting attendees were responsible for making many department decisions through majority rule.

An outside facilitator led the vocational staff as they broke the performance outcomes down into teachable components called "connected learnings." An example of connected learnings for the performance outcome, "Sets Priorities" would include: (a) define priority, (b) determine value of task, (c) assess time frame/schedule, (d) recognize ways that others can help. As teachers continue to create lessons, colleagues will test the lessons in their own classrooms and report results back to the group.

The following conclusions were drawn from this study:

1. Vocational work ethics can be effectively introduced using a combination of direct, indirect and self-evaluative methods.

Direct methods included technical material so students connected vocational work ethics with the technical skills of their trade. This enabled the 34 performance outcomes to become the primary curriculum while the established, technical curriculum became the means by which the outcomes were taught. Indirect methods like modeling behavior or teachable moments and self-evaluations included sharing rubrics with students which reinforced the direct teaching methods used.

2. When vocational work ethics are taught via direct, indirect and self-evaluative methods, students are more likely to be aware of the behavior employers expect from entry-level employees.

Awareness of workplace expectations is the first step toward appropriate workplace behavior. The TST BOCES vocational staff discovered that rating scales were not effective as assessment tools without using standardized, objective descriptions. When both the teacher and the student used rubrics, awareness of behavioral performance was increased.

3. Most health occupation students are able to evaluate their own work behavior with accuracy, but recognize responsible behavior more easily than self-directed behavior.

When students' self-evaluations were compared with teacher evaluations, ratings were more congruent in the Responsible Worker category than in the Self-Directed Worker category. In comparison, this could indicate that the concept of self-directed behavior is more difficult to understand.

4. Patterns of health occupation students' behavior suggest that old workplace behavior is replaced with new behavior in developmental stages as vocational work ethics are learned.

The performance levels of TST BOCES are similar to the developmental stages identified by Miller and Coady (1986). Students at entry-level consistently responded to routine work situations with expected behavior. Above entry-level students easily accepted new work situations as learning experiences and career opportunities. Students performing below entry-level often did not recognize routine work situations and did not respond appropriately. Students at the unacceptable level actively resisted and did not want to comply with established rules and social norms.

5. Vocational work ethics are best learned when they are consistently taught using a combination of direct, indirect and self-evaluative methods.

TST BOCES staff recognized the importance of including direct teaching methods in its preparation of entry-level workers. Strategies used in this study taught the concept of workplace culture. Direct lessons, indirect modeling of behavior and frequent feedback immersed health occupation students in new language and customs. Students were learning how to be successful in an unfamiliar culture. When asked 15 weeks after the completion of the study, 90% of the students felt they had become more effective workers because they had learned the performance outcomes. One student wrote, "They help me remember that there is always something to do and always something to learn."

Opportunities for Further Study

The work presented here demonstrates the importance of group planning and consensus building in defining standards for educational programs. A lengthened study would be helpful in understanding the long-term effects of teaching vocational work ethics. Additional research for teaching vocational work ethics to special needs students is recommended.

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